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CIA seen poor choice for Viet scapegoat

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The Pentagon Papers (which now warrant the prefix 'public more than secret') suggest that the last few American Presidents should have listened more to the analysts from the Central Intelligence Agency about Vietnam than to their advisers in the State Department, Pentagon and National Security Council.

Starting from the earliest parts of the study of US involvement in Vietnam, the national intelligence estimates of the situation look reasonably sound — especially in the revealing glare of hindsight.

The partial documentation of the study suggests that the intelligence community weighed in quite negatively about President Ngo Dinh Diem and his effect on South Vietnam; downplayed the domino theory; was scornful of the value of committing US ground units to a combat role with only a limited bombing campaign underway; and ultimately helped persuade Defense Secretary Robert McNamara of the futility of Rolling Thunder, the bombing war on North Vietnam.

The 7000-page report on these events was compiled by the Defense Department and thus is more representative of Pentagon thinking on the war than of any other Washington agency.

Yet scattered references and direct quotations from CIA estimates can be found throughout. The foresight and overall accuracy of these estimates is one of the most dramatic impressions to be gained from reading of those portions of the full report which have been

Some of the most important intelligence judgments which are at least partially documented in the report are listed here.

o In August 1954, when President Eisenhower was first being urged to prop up the South Vietnamese ~~several months after the~~ French defeat by Vietnamese communists at Dien-bienphu, a quoted national intelligence estimate read:

"Although it is possible that the French and Vietnamese, even with firm support from the US and other powers, may be able to establish a strong regime in South Vietnam, we believe that the chances for this development are poor and, moreover, that the situation is more likely to continue to deteriorate progressively over the next year."

o With Ngo Dinh Diem consolidating his regime in the South during the mid-fifties, the Pentagon writers describe American officials in the embassy, the military and the CIA as regularly reporting on him as "authoritarian, inflexible and remote." By 1960, when the United States, for better or worse, was supporting the then President Diem as a strongman, the CIA minced no words. One intelligence report which the Pentagon analysts characterize as "remarkably sound" in August of 1960 read in part:

"In the absence of more effective Government measures to protect the peasants and to win their positive cooperation, the prospect is for expansion of the areas of Viet Cong control in the countryside, particularly in the south. Dissatisfaction and discontent with the government will

probably continue to rise. These adverse trends are not irreversible, but if they remain unchecked, they will almost certainly in time cause the collapse of the Diem regime."

Four years later, with the United States beginning to get involved in a big way, the CIA is shown as one agency willing to debunk the then conventional wisdom of the domino theory, which held that if South Vietnam fell to the Communists all the rest of East Asia would inevitably follow. On June 9, 1964, several months before the Tonkin Gulf incidents, the report quotes President Johnson at a general meeting about the situation asking: "Would the rest of Southeast Asia necessarily fall if Laos and South Vietnam came under North Vietnamese control?"

The CIA, according to the Pentagon study, answered that Cambodia "might," but no other nation "would quickly succumb."

The agency acknowledged that such a development "would be profoundly damaging to the US position in the Far East" and suggested that it would hurt American prestige and credibility in containing the spread of communism in the area. But the CIA said that even a clear-cut Communist victory in the South would not affect the wider American interest of containing overt attacks "as long as the United States can effectively operate from (its island) bases" in the Far East.

In October 1964, following Tonkin Gulf, at the high point of President Johnson's election campaign vs. Barry Goldwater, the report predicted a continuing political

crisis in Saigon a year after Diem's assassination, while the defense establishment was actively considering a number of contingency plans for widening the war, the CIA was far from sanguine about the prospects: "We believe that the conditions favor a further decay of GVN (Government of South Vietnam) will and effectiveness. The likely pattern of this decay will be increasing defeatism, paralysis of leadership, friction with Americans, exploration of possible lines of political accommodations with the other side, and a general petering-out of the war effort."

o The following spring with the Rolling Thunder bombing of North Vietnam underway, President Johnson prepared to send two Marine battalions into the war as the Joint Chiefs

asked Secretary McNamara to clear away "all administrative impediments that hamper us in the prosecution of this war."

Just at this time, on April 2, 1965, according to one of the chronologies contained in the Pentagon report, CIA director McCone circulated a memo "dissenting from the presidential decision to have US troops take active part in active combat."

"He feels that such action is not justified and wise unless the air attacks on the North are increased sufficiently to really be physically damaging to the DRV (Democratic Republic of North Vietnam), and to put real pressure on her." The CIA director predicted, said the report, that the United States "was getting mired down in a war it could not win."

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